

The Application of Communication Strategies by Students with Different Levels of Communication Apprehension in EFL Context

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Abstract—The purpose of this study is to examine different kinds of communication strategies employed by students with different levels of communication apprehension in Iranian EFL context. It also investigates which communication strategies are the most and the least frequent ones used by students with high and low levels of communication apprehension. The research participants watched a short visual story and then retold what they found out. The participants employed thirteen communicative strategies which were ranged from the most to the least frequent for both groups of EFL learners. In terms of the type and the frequency of communication strategies, the outcomes of research revealed that EFL learners with high level of communication apprehension employed a larger number of communicative strategies than EFL learners with low level of communication apprehension.

Index Terms—EFL context, anxiety, language learning anxiety, communication apprehension, communication strategies

I. INTRODUCTION

Different language skills and components in second language learning might be the source of anxiety which create a blockage in language learning processing (Tanveer, 2007). The same as second language learning, in foreign language learning learners might experience different sorts of anxiety. It is believed that oral production in EFL context is to high extent the most severe skill which causes foreign language learners to be anxious. Producing language orally in front of a group of learners and teacher sounds difficult and creates anxiety.

Due to limited amount of exposure in EFL context, the learners find out that the most anxiety producing factor is oral performance. It has been observed that in English as a foreign language context, most learners come across very big problems in oral production. In this respect, Horwitz (1996) claimed that language anxiety refers to feeling of fear, worrisome and stress which foreign language learners experience when they are dealt with various linguistic aspects including performing active and passive skills. He believed that many foreign language learners find language learning context stressful, particularly if they have to perform something using foreign language. Fear of making errors and mistakes and having a tendency to compensate the probable mistakes cause the learners to give up some parts of their oral performance at the expense of employing language learning strategies. Ellis (2005) stated that having difficulties in oral production is to high extent the most widespread problem that almost every foreign language speaker experiences during the process of language learning. Comparing different language skills namely writing, listening, speaking and reading; it sounds that speaking is the most anxiety creating skill for EFL learners.

Language anxiety causes several problems in the process of language learning. It blocks the process of language learning in a way that language learners cannot succeed in achieving different linguistic skills or components of second or foreign language. Language anxiety is classified into different kinds among which communication apprehension is one of the most important ones which impedes second or foreign language learners in performing oral communication. The studies done in this domain indicated that second or foreign language learners experience fear or concern when they tend to speak in front of a group of audience. In order to facilitate oral performance, second or foreign language learners employ different sorts of communication strategies. In this regard, Dorneyei (2007) believed that “the use of communication strategies help second or foreign language learners to get rid of communication apprehension and facilitate the message delivery and meaning convey in performing oral communication” (p. 47).

Daly (2002) proposed that the employment of communication strategies in ESL or EFL context varies from one person to another. The outcomes of several studies in this area revealed that language learners with high level of communication apprehension had a great tendency to use more communication strategies in comparison with those with low level of communication apprehension. As a result, the present study firstly attempts to find out if foreign language learners with high level of communication apprehension employ more communication strategies than learners with low level of communication apprehension; secondly it analyzes what are the most frequent communication strategies used

by both EFL learners with high and low level of communication apprehension; and finally it attempts to find out whether there are any similarities in the frequency and sort of communication strategies used by both groups.

This study tries to examine whether foreign language learners with high level of communication apprehension use great number of communication strategies. It also investigates which communication strategies are more frequently employed by foreign language learners. Regarding Horwitz (2001) and Dornyei (2007), foreign language learners with high degree of communication apprehension have a great tendency to employ a large number of communication strategies in comparison with the foreign language learners with low degree of communication apprehension. Thus, the main goal of the current study is to explore which group of foreign language learners uses higher number of communicative strategies. In addition, Horwitz (2001) believes that certain numbers of communicative strategies are the most frequent communicative strategies employed by learners with high and low levels of communication apprehension.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The fulfilled researches concerning the use of communication strategies have mostly been conducted in the context of "English as a Second Language", and there are not many studies conducted in EFL context (Horwitz, 2001). Hence, the present study attempts to investigate the use of communication strategies by foreign language learners with high and low level of communication apprehension in Iranian context as an EFL context. The former studies (Schmidt 2008; Dewis, 2009) have mostly studied the sort of communication strategies and there are few studies dealing with the frequency of the use of different sorts of communication strategies used by EFL learners with high and low level of communication strategies. Consequently, the current study investigates both factors (sort and frequency) for learners with different levels of apprehension. It is hoped that the finding can be beneficial to syllabus designers and EFL teachers to introduce and teach tasks and materials which are in harmony with learners' levels of communication apprehension. The research consequences can also help EFL teachers become aware of the sort and frequency of communication strategies employed by learners with high and low level of communication apprehension, so that they would recognize their students' levels of apprehension and help them learn which strategies to use in their oral performance.

Many language learners experience some problems in second or foreign language learning contexts because of the stressful situation and feeling of concern and fear. The anxious learner cannot express the meaning he or she is supposed to convey. According to Horwitz (1995) language anxiety is "the feeling of nervousness, worry or uneasiness felt by language learners, particularly second or foreign language learners" (p. 49).

McCrosky (1999) proposed a measure in order to find out the degree of communication apprehension that a language learner experiences in oral performance. The measure was known as "PRCA" which contained twenty four statements related to communication apprehension. Language learners with high communication apprehension are those who get high score in Personal Report of Communication Apprehension. Language learners with high communication apprehension tend to employ communication strategies in order to solve the difficulties in oral communication.

The major significance of research into foreign/second language anxiety is in the relationship between anxiety and performance in the foreign language. A large number of studies have found that this anxiety is negatively related to language performance. MacIntyre and Gardner (1989) stated that even with large number of variations in research methodologies there is a clear relationship between foreign language anxiety and foreign language proficiency in communicative situations. To cut it short, communication apprehension as one of the sorts of anxiety makes learners employ communication strategies in order to solve their communication difficulties. In the following part, the definition of communication strategies, classification of communication strategies and teach-ability of communication strategies as well as studies conducted in this area will be reported.

Definition and classification of Communication Strategy

Communicative strategy as an important instrument to help ESL or EFL learners to get rid of possible difficulties in oral production has been defined by several scholars. In this regard, Corder (2007) stated that "communication strategy is a systematic technique used by a speaker to express his or her meaning when faced with some problems in language performance" (p. 56). In the same way, Dornyei (2002) believed communication strategies helped learners to have confidence and keep on using the target language in oral interaction.

From the psychological perspective, Færch and Kasper (1983) defined communicative strategy as "potential conscious plan for solving what a language learner assumes as a problem in reaching a particular communicative goal" (p. 36). They also explained similar data in terms of an individual's mental response to a problem rather than as a joint response by two people. According to their definition, in general, there are two possible strategies for solving communication problems, namely reduction strategies and achievement strategies. These two strategies had fifteen communicative strategies as their own sub parts. However, Dornyei (2002) proposed fifteen communicative strategies which were widely accepted by most scholars. In this respect, Dornyei's (2002) classification of communicative strategies included: code switching, hesitation, using fillers, word coinage, all purpose words, literal translation, topic avoidance, circumlocution and approximation. Horwitz (1995) listing fourteen communicative strategies as the main strategies employed by ESL learners believed that some students are trapped in a stressful situation when they are speaking in their target language particularly if they are addressing a big or small group of audience. That fearful reaction is intensified if they know that they are evaluated by an outsider or an instructor. Students are worried about

having to communicate in front of a group of audience and they feel highly nervous when they don't understand every part of the target language input presented in the language they're trying to learn.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Introduction

The research design of the current study is qualitative. The studies connected to the use of communication strategies by foreign language learners with variant degrees of communication apprehension in foreign language contexts are limited. As it was mentioned in the previous part, the researcher could not find sufficient and verified data in this area to propose research hypothesis. As a result, the researcher proposed three research questions as the foundation of the current study. In the absence of research hypothesis, research question as one of the main properties of qualitative research shapes the base of present study. As Gasp (2010) stated "qualitative research design deals with looking in depth at data in non-numerical form and is especially strong in describing and exploring the phenomena and generating tentative explanations" (p. 56). In the following part, research questions, research participants and instruments will be taken into account.

B. Research Questions

The research questions are as follows:

1. What are different types of Communication Strategies employed by foreign language learners with high level of Communication Apprehension in oral performance?
2. What are different types of Communication Strategies employed by foreign language learners with Low level of Communication Apprehension in oral performance?
3. To what extent are the type and the frequency of the Communicative Strategies used by foreign language learners with high and low levels of communication apprehension consistent with each other?

C. Research Participants and Context

The research participants included thirty EFL learners whose levels of proficiency were pre-intermediate or intermediate. They were learning English as a foreign language in a non-state and non-profit language institute. They had studied English at least for ten semesters at the time of conducting this research task. PRCA- 24 (Personal Report of Communication Apprehension) was employed for dividing subjects into high and low level of communication apprehension. PRCA-24 includes twenty four statements connected to learners' states of fear and nervousness in different contexts. With respect to their responses of given statements in PRCA-24, two groups were selected as research participants each including 15 male/female subjects. With respect to PRCA-24 criterion, they were classified to "EFL learners with high and low levels of communication apprehension" and "EFL learners with low level of communication apprehension" groups.

All research participants were originally from the city of Zanjan and their age range varied from 17 to 21. Although gender was not considered as a variable affecting the research outcomes, the researcher selected the participants from both genders. In terms of the number of languages spoken, all participants were trilingual, i.e., they were able to speak Azeri as their mother tongue, Farsi as their country's official language and medium of educational system and English as a foreign language learned at English institutes.

The audience covered a group of EFL learners from different levels of English proficiency who were informed to attend a context in which they were assumed to play the role of real members of a group listening to a speaker. They were almost twenty learners from the same institutes and were requested to listen to the participants who were retelling a short visual story.

D. Research Instruments

The present study collected data through a background information questionnaire as well as the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension-24 (PRCA-24) designed by Horwitz (2001) which included 24 statements about language learners' level of anxiety or communication apprehension (See appendix A and B). The background information questionnaire included name, age, gender and level of proficiency. It also included a question related to this fact that if they had consciously used any communicative strategies like the use of avoidance of topics, asking for help and also the message abandonments.

PRCA-24 comprised twenty four statements related to learners' state of fear and nervousness in different contexts. "The Criterion of classifying ESL of EFL learners into high, moderate or low level of communication apprehension is a standard criterion which has been piloted for several times with well-known scholars in different settings with different ESL or EFL learners in different socio-cultural contexts" (McCroskey, 2003) According to Horwitz (2001) the participants' scores should range between contexts. She also believes that (2001) the participants' scores should range between games and chatting with her friends in the internet. The notion of "her parents thought she was deeply busy studying while she was doing everything except studying for final exams" was the research instrument that subjects were supposed to retell to a group of unknown audience including twenty male and female language learners who had the permission to help the subject if he or she faced any difficulties in oral performance of retelling the visual short

story. The researcher recorded the voice of the participants who were retelling a visual short story and also the voice of the audience who helped the speakers in some situations to use possible communication strategies.

E. Data Collection Procedure

In order to collect the data, the researcher encountered some problems because initially the institutes did not agree to let this project be conducted at their institutes. But with face to face negotiation and providing some adequate information for keeping all the procedure secure, some agreed with the plan. Finally, the researcher persuaded 2 institutes and guaranteed that every aspect of research related to institutes will be perfectly confidential. Moreover, both institutes asked the researcher to confirm that institutes related aspects of research will be in their access.

Since the approach taken for the current research is qualitative, the researcher tried to have the most natural context for research conduct. For this purpose a created classroom situation which looked like a real situation was made. To create the ultimate naturalness, the researcher provided a classroom in which the audience members were not known to the speaker and the speaker was assumed to address the audience and get the help whenever they were in need of finding a communication strategy to follow the retelling. The procedure of data analysis began with transcription of recorded voices which lasted almost thirty minutes. Through an exact analysis of transcribed data, the researcher tried to collect the communication strategies employed by learners during their retelling. In addition to finding the sorts of communication strategies, the researcher identified the frequency of each communication strategy used by both high and low level of communication apprehension.

The transcription process of collected data and finding various sorts of communication strategies used by the participants and ultimately categorizing them into sorts of communication strategies were quite challenging and time consuming. Descriptive statistics was used in order to analyze the collected data. The number of communication strategies and frequency of the employment of communication strategies were calculated for each participant.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

In both data analysis and discussion three research questions are considered together. Considering the total number and type of communication strategies, twelve types of communication strategies were employed by foreign language learners with high level of communication apprehension. The twelve communication strategies are as follows: literal translation, nonverbal means, code switching, repetition, message abandonment, topic avoidance, approximation, using wrong words, appeal for help, self-correction, using fillers and circumlocution. Coining new words or structure and foreignizing and using all purpose words were not found in speech of foreign language learners with high level of communication apprehension.

TABLE 1
COMMUNICATIVE STRATEGIES EMPLOYED BY ENGLISH AS FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNERS WITH HIGH LEVEL OF COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION

EFL Learners	MA	TA	C	A	UW	UN	LT	CS	AH	UF	SC	R
1	-	3	4	8	1	5	-	1	10	6	3	13
2	1	2	3	7	6	4	1	2	5	4	4	9
3	4	5	8	11	-	-	2	3	7	8	3	12
4	1	2	5	10	5	1	1	5	7	10	4	9
5	1	5	6	10	3	4	-	-	4	4	4	11
6	-	3	4	5	-	5	2	4	8	5	2	9
7	4	4	5	8	2	4	1	3	4	5	5	12
8	1	3	6	7	3	2	-	4	3	7	8	10
9	-	4	6	10	3	-	2	5	4	4	10	8
10	1	5	5	9	3	3	-	2	6	6	2	8
11	1	1	4	11	5	5	2	8	7	10	7	10
12	-	5	6	9	5	1	-	4	5	12	12	9
13	2	-	5	11	-	1	1	-	9	3	2	10
14	-	5	7	8	4	3	-	5	6	7	5	13
15	1	4	6	9	1	1	-	3	12	7	10	12
Percentage	1.99	5.97	9.37	15.59	4.80	4.57	1.40	5.74	11.37	11.48	9.49	18.17
Frequency	17	51	80	133	41	39	12	49	97	98	81	155

Table 1 shows the type of communication strategies used by learners with high level of communication apprehension. The data analysis indicated that repetition was the most frequent strategy with the total number of 155 and with the percentage of 18.17% and so on.

The analysis of the data gathered for foreign language learners with low level of communication apprehension indicated that thirteen communicative strategies were employed by them. These items included: using fillers, using of nonlinguistic devices, message abandonment, literal translation, code switching, self-correction, topic/concept avoidance, circumlocution, approximation, repetition, using all purpose words, appealing for help and using wrong terms. Learners with low level of communication apprehension did not use two communicative strategies. The surprising fact is that coining new words and foreignizing were common communicative strategies which were not employed by both groups.

TABLE 2

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES EMPLOYED BY ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNERS WITH LOW LEVEL OF COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION

EFL Learners	MA	TA	C	A	Up	UW	UN	LT	CS	AH	UF	SC	R
1	2	1	-	6	4	1	3	2	-	3	6	3	6
2	-	3	1	5	1	-	2	-	3	-	8	6	3
3	4	5	2	3	-	2	5	1	-	1	4	2	5
4	-	-	2	4	-	-	2	-	3	-	6	4	4
5	-	1	6	3	2	4	-	-	2	1	7	4	3
6	1	-	2	6	-	-	3	-	-	1	5	5	5
7	-	2	2	4	-	5	2	-	-	4	8	2	7
8	4	-	-	1	-	3	1	2	4	-	7	5	5
9	-	3	1	3	1	1	-	-	-	-	8	1	4
10	-	-	-	3	-	2	3	1	-	-	6	3	2
11	-	-	2	5	1	-	2	-	4	-	4	4	6
12	-	1	-	2	-	1	1	1	-	-	3	4	2
13	-	3	-	6	-	2	4	2	4	1	7	1	6
14	-	-	1	4	-	9	-	-	-	-	8	1	6
15	-	1	1	5	1	3	2	1	-	-	3	3	3
Percentage Frequency	2.55	4.65	4.65	13.95	2.32	7.67	6.97	2.32	4.65	2.55	20.93	11.16	15.58
	11	20	20	60	10	33	30	10	20	11	90	48	67

The statistics also show that the most frequent communicative strategy used by foreign language learners with low level of communicative apprehension was using fillers. The total number of using fillers was 90 and its percentage was 20.93.

V. CONCLUSION

The results of the present study proved the existence of high levels of language anxiety in most of the learners. In addition, the researcher witnessed that foreign language learners with high level of communication apprehension used more frequent number of communicative strategies than the foreign language learners with low level of communication apprehension. The researcher also discovered that the foreign language learners with high level of communication strategies were altogether employing 12 kinds of communicative strategies. On the other hand, the communicative strategies employed by foreign language learners with low level of communication apprehension were 13.

In contrast to foreign language learners with high level of communication who did not use three communicative strategies, learners with low level of communication apprehension did not use two communicative strategies. The surprising fact is that coining new words and foreignizing were common communicative strategies which were not employed by both groups, while using all purpose words were used by learners with low level but it was not used by learners with high level of communication apprehension.

Regardless of the level of anxiety and communication apprehension, almost all research participants acknowledged that they have some degree of anxiety and nervousness while they were speaking foreign language in front of others. The fact is that the type and frequency of the use of communicative strategies are in consistency with the level of communication apprehension. Also, the outcomes of this study revealed that the number of communicative strategies employed by learners with high level of communication apprehension was larger than that of the speakers with low level of communication apprehension. Hence, the researcher concluded that the findings of the current research were consistent with the outcomes of the studies conducted by Horwitz (2001) and Dornyei (1995). To sum up, the results presented that the type and frequency of communicative strategies for speakers with high level of communication apprehension was larger than the speakers with low level of communication apprehension and regardless of the type and frequency, the total number of strategies employed by speakers with high communication apprehension exceeded the speakers with low communication apprehension; this outcome showed that the speakers with high level of communication apprehension were concerned and afraid of making mistakes in front of a group of audience.

The current study will have several benefits in the pedagogical domain for both language teachers and curriculum and textbook designers. Furthermore, teachers can be aware of the most frequent communicative strategies and try to make their students become familiar with them and they can also teach communication strategies which are beneficial for students in performing any specific oral task. The results might help those in charge of curriculum development and task designation, since they will have enough information of the communicative strategies used frequently by students in EFL context and introduce tasks and materials which are consistent with learners' level of proficiency and communication apprehension.

Finally, the research findings can help the language teachers to be more aware of the communicative strategies used by foreign language learners in created classroom contexts. Considering Ellis (2004) teachers' awareness of the communicative strategies used by both groups of learners will guide them design and adapt materials that are more favorable to foreign language learning context. Awareness of communicative strategies will surely help teachers reconsider their teaching methods and come up with more influential methods and approaches in teaching English as a foreign language and do their best to lessen the degree of communication apprehension in their students.

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